DECORATION OF THE EXHIBITION BUILDING.

ROYAL INSTITUTE OF BRITISH ARCHITECTS.

At a meeting on the 16th inst. Mr. A. Salvin in the chair*, Mr. Owen Jones read a paper "On the Decorations proposed for the Exhibition Building in Hyde park;" "prompted," as he said, "by the fact, that the specimen already executed there had excited some attention from his professional brethren, and in some quarters met with very severe censure." As the paper has already appeared in the morning journals, we must confine ourselves to some extracts. The reader said,—

Of late years the employment and appreciation of colour has made most rapid strides throughout Europe, but England has lagged far behind, which is the more remarkable as her painters have long been renowned as colourists. The fault lies, I fear, with ourselves: we have too long neglected this essential portion of an architect's studies and practice. The interiors of our houses have been given over to the upholsterer and decorator,—many of them men of great taste and talent, I admit; but still we must regret that architects have not directed more of their skill and learning to this subject, and been prepared to lead rather than to follow. We are only now beginning to shake off the trammels which the last age of universal whitewashing has left us. Everything but pure white was considered universally, and still is by many, as wanting in good taste. The evidences of colour on the monuments of Greece were first stoutly denied, and then supposed to be the works of after-barbarous ages; and when this position was no longer tenable, it was said that the ancients, though perfect masters of form, were ignorant of colour, or at all events misapplied it. Men were reluctant to give up their long-cherished idea of the white marble of the Pantheon and the simplicity of its forms, and refused to regard it as a building coloured in every part, and covered with a most elaborate system of ornamentation. The architecture of our fine Gothic cathedrals has lost half its beauty from the absence of colour. He who without prejudice sees a Gothic building for the first time picked out in colour will be forced to admit that until then he had not understood or appreciated Gothic architecture. * * *

The very nature of the material of which the building in the park is mainly constructed, viz., iron, *requires that it should be painted.* On what principle shall we do this? Should we be justified in adopting a simple tint of white or stone colour, the usual method of painting iron? Now, it must be borne in mind that this building *will be covered on the south side and over the whole of the roof with canvas*, so that there can be but little light and shade. The myriads of similar lines, therefore, of which the building is composed, falling one before the other, would lose all distinctness, and would, in fact, form one dull cloud overhanging the Exhibition: a line of columns, as even now may be seen at the building, would present the effect of a white wall, and it would be impossible in the distance to distinguish one column from another. This mode of painting would have the further disadvantage of rendering the building totally unconnected with the various objects it is destined to hold. May the building be painted of a dark colour, like the roofs of some of our railway stations? This, equally with the white method, would present one mass of indistinctness: the relief of the cast-iron would disappear—each column and girder would present to the eye but a flat *silhouette*.

Let us now consider the building painted with some pale neutral tint—dull green or buff. In doing this we should be perfectly safe, provided the colours were not too pale to be indistinct, or too dark so as sensibly to affect the eye: one could hardly make a mistake; yet, how tame and monotonous would be the result. It would be necessary that this tint—whatever we might choose—should be of such a subdued neutral character as to avoid a difficulty well known to mounters of drawings and painters of picture galleries, that, in proportion as you incline to any shade of colour, in that exact proportion you injure or destroy the objects it is intended to relieve which may have similar colours. To this, then, should we be reduced—a dull, monotonous colour, without character. How unworthy would this be of the great occasion—how little would it impress the public—how little would it teach the artist—it would be to cut instead of patiently unravelling the knot.

We are now brought to the consideration of the only other well defined system which presents itself,—viz. parti-colouring.

This, I conceive, if successfully carried out, would bring the building and its contents into one perfect harmony: it would fitly carry out one of the objects for which this Exhibition was formed,—viz., to promote the union of fine arts with manufactures. It would be an experiment on an immense scale, which, if successful, would tend to dispel the prejudices of those whose eyes are yet unformed to colour, to develop the imperfect appreciations of others, and save this country from the reproach which foreign visitors, more educated in this particular than ourselves, would not fail to make, were the building otherwise painted. It would everywhere bring out the construction of the building, which, as I said before, would appear higher, longer, and more solid.

To produce this result it is essential not to make a mistake. Parti-colouring may become the most vulgar, as it may be the most beautiful, of objects. It is necessary, therefore, to proceed with great caution,—to calculate the effect of every step,—not to be misled by the appearance of any one portion of the building, but bear in mind always the effect the building will have when complete and furnished. I have not shrunk from treading a path beset with so many difficulties; and I willingly appear before you to meet your criticisms, and to weigh any opinions which the experience of my brother architects may suggest.

If we examine the remains of the architecture of the ancients, we shall find everywhere that in the early periods the prevailing colours used in decoration were the primaries —*blue, red, and yellow*; the secondaries appearing very sparingly. We find this equally in the remains of Nineveh, Central America, Egypt, and Greece; and throughout the Eastern civilizations generally we find also every where that, as time wore on, the secondary colours invading the dominion of the primaries, blue and red were supplanted by *green and purple*. In Egypt, in the temples built by the Pharoahs, blue, red, and yellow mainly prevail; while in those built by the Ptolemies the greens and purples take their places. In those of the Roman period colours are still further degraded to a dull and incongruous muddiness.

Among modern examples of the use of colour we may cite the Royal Chapel of Munich, where blue, red, and gold form the principal harmonies, as far superior to the other churches of the same city where the secondary and tertiary colours prevail. At Paris, in the church of St. Vincent de Paul, decidedly the most perfect specimen of modern decorations in any country, the colours are blue, red, and gold, *separated by white*. This church contrasts admirably with the decorations of St. Denis, St. Germain des Près, and other churches of Paris, where the secondaries and tertiaries prevail. When the secondary colours were used, in the best periods, in conjunction with the primaries, they were generally confined to the lower parts of the building; following in this Nature, who uses for her flowers the primaries, and reserves the secondaries for her leaves and stalks.

In the decoration of the Exhibition building I therefore propose to use the colours *blue, red, and yellow*, in *such relative proportions as to neutralise or destroy each other*. Thus, no one colour will be dominant or fatigue the eye, and all the exhibited objects will assist and be assisted by the colours of the building itself. In house decoration we occasionally find a run upon one colour—we have a green room, a pink room, and a red room, &c. It would obviously be unwise to adopt any one colour for this building, when the contents will be of all imaginable hues from white to black. Discarding, on the other hand, the perfect neutral, white, as unfit for the occasion, we naturally adopt the blue, red, and yellow in or near the neutral proportions of 8, 5, 3; but, to avoid any harsh antagonism of the primary colours when in contact, or any undesired complimentary secondaries arising from the immediate proximity of the primaries, I propose in all cases to interpose a line of white between them, which will soften them and give them their true value.

It is well known that if blue and red come together without the interposition of white, they will each become tinged with the complimentary colour of the other: thus, the red would become slightly orange and the blue slightly green. As all coloured bodies reflect some white rays, the white in juxtaposition by its superior force extinguishes these white rays, and we see the colours purer, at the same time that the white becomes tinged with the complimentary colour of that against which it is placed, thus further heightening the effect.

As one of the objects of decorating a building is to increase the effect of light and shade, the best means of using blue, red, and yellow, is to place blue, which retires, on the concave surfaces; yellow, which advances, on the convex; and red, the colour of the middle distance, on the horizontal planes; the neutral white on the vertical planes. Following out this principle on the building before us, we have red for the undersides of the girders, yellow on the round portions of the columns, blue in the hollows of the capitals.

Now, it is necessary not only to put the several colours in the right places, but they must also be used in their due proportions to each other.

Mr. Field, in his admirable works on colour, has shown by direct experiment that white light consists of blue, red, and yellow neutralizing each other in the proportions of eight, five, and three. It will readily be seen that the nearer we can arrive at this state of neutrality, the more harmonious and light-giving will a building become; and an examination of the most perfect specimens of harmonious colouring of the ancients will show that this proportion has generally obtained—that is to say, that there has been as much blue as the yellow and red put together; thus the light and the shade balancing each other. Of course we cannot, in decorating buildings, always command the exact proportions of coloured surface we require, but the balance of colours can always be obtained by a change in the colours themselves: thus, if the surface to be covered should give too much yellow, we should make the red more crimson and the blue more purple; that is, we should take the yellow out of them. So, if we have too much blue, we should make the yellow more orange and the red more scarlet.

In the present instance I must do this in the presence of the world at large. In ordinary cases the architect may shut up his building till it is complete: here the public will watch every step from the first to the last. On this account I invite you to suspend your judgment, and beg of those who have already seen the specimen of the building, or who may see the work in its progress, to banish constantly from their minds the objects by which it is now surrounded. It is evident to all that a *yellow and blue column* will appear very differently when seen with a carpet, or other hangings for a background, to what it does now with a background of deal boards and foreground of carpenters' benches."

In the course of a conversation (a somewhat lame one, by the way) which followed,

Mr. I'Anson objected to the underside of the girders being coloured red, the effect of which was that it distinguished sharply the longitudinal lines of the roof of the building; whereas the form of the roof in the centre compartment was not so satisfactory that it should be made too prominent. He referred to the decorations of Pompeii, in which colour was employed in a regular gradation, from a dark base to a lighter colour in the upper part of the walls, and inquired how the basis of the columns in the Exhibition Building would be coloured.

Mr. Jones explained that they would be invisible, and that the objects exhibited would complete the harmony of colour, and, in fact, render his proposed decorations quite subordinate. The red girders objected to by Mr. I'Anson had also been objected to by the Royal Commissioners, and (as we understood) would be abandoned.

A question was put as to whether some ornamental spandels from the columns to girders in centre, as shown in the interior view which was exhibited, were merely decorative or structural.

Mr. Jones said they were decorative merely: he regretted to add that they had been rejected. The defect of the building was, that its immense nave

* Messrs. J. G. Hall, G. Morgan, and T. H. Bushforth were elected associates.

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